

Historic, Archive Document

Do not assume content reflects current scientific knowledge, policies, or practices.

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION WORK
IN
AGRICULTURE AND HOME ECONOMICS
STATE OF LOUISIANA

LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY AND AGRICULTURAL
AND MECHANICAL COLLEGE AND UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE COOPERATING

Extension Service

University Station
Baton Rouge, La.
November 12, 1950

To: Persons Interested in Louisiana Native Irises

The amazing history of the discovery and development of the Louisiana native iris as a garden subject during the brief period of the past thirty years has been told in an authoritative manner by Miss Caroline Dormon. A copy of her story is enclosed for your information. With her intriguing style she has carried the reader through the successive steps of discovery of new botanical species by the scientist; exploration and "finds" of the collectors; new creations by amateur hybridizers; and tests and research by our public institutions. This document is an historic record which most iris lovers will wish to preserve for future reference.

For the information of those who do not know Miss Dormon, she is a naturalist, an artist, a writer, and a lecturer on the native flora of this region. Her article is the more authentic since she herself has played such a prominent role in collecting and popularizing this native of the Louisiana lowlands.

Claude W. Davis

Claude W. Davis, Asst. State Agent and
Professor of Agr. Extension Education.

THE LOUISIANA IRIS REACHES STARDOM

Caroline Dormon

The first time I saw some gorgeous iris growing in ditches by the roadside, little did I think they would one day be world famous! In 1920, while visiting Mrs. A.F. Storm at Morgan City, I spied them, in masses of lovely color.

Naturally, my discovery left me breathless with excitement. On my return home I searched through the botanies, but could find only little rust-red *I. fulva*, which was named many years ago. With doubt and misgiving, I brought a few plants to try in my North Louisiana hill country. Some of these original clones flourish there today. This collection has been allowed its own sweet will, and it is interesting to observe that there are still typical *I. giganteaerulea* forms among them.

The next news I had of these irises was when Dr. J.K. Small made his startling discovery of the great New Orleans fields in 1926. He really saw them in 1925, but did not begin their study until the next year. He explored a large area, during several years, and collected hundreds of forms. Many of these he named, had painted, and published pictures and descriptions in *ADDISONIA* (New York Botanical Garden). He told me that he received letters from several foreign countries, asking information about the new irises. This was the first publicity our Gypsy beauties received, but, unlike the Hollywood stars, they remained shy and retiring. They still did not "catch on" horticulturally.

From Dr. Small I learned that a few persons in and around New Orleans had quietly collected some of these irises and had them growing in their gardens. The first time he came to Briarwood he brought me a sack of rhizomes. Under pressure, he admitted that these were only good varieties of blue and violet. "But isn't there someone in New Orleans who would guide me to whites and reds?" I pleaded. He chuckled in a characteristic way and said, "You go to Mrs. B.S. Nelson. She will treat you right." Mrs. Nelson had guided him to some of the finest fields, where he collected whites and various color-forms. The late George Thomas, Superintendent of Parks in New Orleans, collected with Dr. Small, and discovered the first native yellow, a small *I. fulva* in a bright aureolin shade. He it was who saw the iris we now call *Cajan* growing in the garden of Mr. Faulk.

Over a period of years Mr. and Mrs. Clifford Lyons collected good native iris in the vicinity of New Orleans. They would don hipboots and wade the wildest bogs, and their selections were excellent. When they moved from the city, they gave their collection to Mrs. Cammie Henry. A white was so exquisite that when it bloomed Mrs. Henry exclaimed, "That is just an answer to prayer!" So "Answer to Prayer" it became - but alas, it has joined the ranks of "lost iris".

Dr. Small also told me that Mrs. Allen Ellender, of Houma, had Louisiana iris growing in her garden. And Randolph Bazet, of the same city, not only grew them, but went on several collecting trips with Dr. Small. Joe G. Richard, ever awake to the horticultural value of plants, accompanied him on some of his later expeditions. An incident which delighted Dr. Small, after the newspapers "broke" the story of his iris discoveries, was the receipt of a telegram from Mrs. Robert Randolph, of Alexandria. "I want to know," she wired, "how and where I can get some of these iris?"

The excitement spread. Of course Mrs. Cammie Henry, of Melrose plantation, "must" have these iris for her vast gardens. With very fertile soil and unlimited soft water, they grew to perfection there. And she wanted every color. Never shall I forget a wild trip I took with her and "Fugaboo", her small colored driver. Dr. Small had told us that he found reds on Bayou Salle, below Houma. Well, we almost drove off into the Gulf - but no reds did we find. We did get some other lovelies, however. Mrs. Henry left us a beautiful rose-colored hybrid, an accidental seedling, which bears her name.

The finest collection of all was amassed by Mrs. Dan Debaillon (Mary Swords), of Lafayette. She often drove to New Orleans, and, with her keen eye for beauty, observed these colorful flowers growing in sheets around Arabi and Paradis. In 1932 she began collecting in earnest. No dilettante, she. Her garden already well

known for unusual camellias, azaleas, and deciduous magnolias, she now concentrated on our native iris. In the few short years between that time and her death, she had hundreds of colors and forms growing by her pools and ponds, and in garden beds. She always said she was too interested in saving the fast-vanishing wildings to take much interest in hybridizing. However, during her last illness, she gave the MacMillans of Abbeville a quantity of seeds. Mr. MacMillan says that some of his finest iris came from these, among them the famous Bayou Sunset. Having visited Briarwood many times, and seen how the iris flourished here in my bogs, Mrs. Debaillon willed me the cream of her collection. To help insure their perpetuation, I gave one of each variety to Southwestern Louisiana Institute at Lafayette, and Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge.

W. B. MacMillan kept telling Mrs. Debaillon of some big red and yellow iris in a bog near Abbeville, and begged her to come see. She went, and there they were - the wonderful Abbeville iris. She wrote me, "There are hundreds of huge reds, and the yellows! Not just a clump or two, but great clones of them, dozens and dozens." She sent me one plant of each of the best - except one red which she called "Amazing". There was only one plant. It was later named Homahoula, Choctaw for "Beloved Red". Mr. and Mrs. MacMillan have been collecting ever since, and now have a garden of beauties. The Steen bog contains some of the finest varieties, and Mrs. Steen has been most generous in permitting collecting in all but one part she wants preserved.

Soon after Mary Debaillon's death, Mr. MacMillan began agitating the idea of organizing a state iris society, to be named in her honor. By this time the Horticultural Department of SLI had acquired a livewire by the name of Ira S. Nelson and Mr. MacMillan enlisted his interest. Then there was a small dynamo at Lafayette, by name Katherine Cornay (Mrs. Ray). To these three, all praise should be given for organizing and promoting the society. It meets only once a year - but what a meeting! A beautiful iris show - Louisiana natives, only - and a feature lecture by some well known irisarian.

All the friends of Mary Debaillon, and iris lovers in Louisiana and adjoining states, have contributed much to the success of the society. There is also a test garden maintained at SLI, where growers send their best to be put on display. Mr. Joel Fletcher, the school president, has been most generous and enthusiastic in cooperating with the society, and offering facilities of SLI. Recently, the state society voted to join the American Iris Society, but to retain its individuality, still. The name has been changed to The Society for Louisiana Irises, and a Mary S. Debaillon Award has been established, given to the iris voted the best of the year.

Recently a Test Garden has been established at Louisiana State University, and many fine iris are thriving in the rich beds provided for them. Much of the credit for this addition must go to Claude W. Davis, President of the Society for Louisiana Irises, and to Joe G. Richard, long a native iris enthusiast.

Through the years, there have been a number of collectors. E. A. McIlhenny brought many fine iris to his Jungle Gardnes, of which his Jungle Garden Pink is probably the most popular. Dr. George Arceneaux of Houma became interested in the earlier years, and, being a trained geneticist, has made some interesting crosses. Also, he has written some valuable articles on the subject. Percy Viosca, Jr., of New Orleans, being a herpetologist, visited the very places to find Louisiana iris, and has named several charming forms. He, too, has written most informative articles on these iris. Dr. Clair Brown, of the Botany Department of L.S.U. has contributed to the sum of our knowledge on the subject.

When my sister-in-law, Ruth Dormon, acquired a country place, she went in for Louisiana iris on a big scale. She did not take time to hybridize, but some of her open seedlings were lovely, Mellow Gleam being the most popular. Through her efforts, plants were distributed over a good part of the United States, and a few were sent to Canada.

While others were collecting, Lillian Trichel was always dusting pollen from one flower on another, and otherwise interfering with the bumblebees. But her efforts have paid off, for her seedling, Caddo, received the Mary S. Debaillon

Award for 1950, while another was given Honorable Mention by the AIS judges. Others who received H.M. were MacMillan, for Bayou Sunset; "Ike" Nelson, for Cherry Bounce, and Joe Richard, for Midshipman.

For some years, the Louisiana iris has been moving from the Gulf Coast to Shreveport, and this city now boasts some of the finest collections in existence. These growers have also produced some very fine seedlings, which have been named and registered with the American Iris Society. Mmes. Mathews, Shehee, Alec Smith, Colquitt ("Minnie"), Clarke, and Gorton have this "bog" iris growing in garden beds and liking it. In nearby Arcadia, in red clay hills, Sidney Conger has produced some of the loveliest hybrids. Next spring the American Iris Society will hold its first meeting in Shreveport, and these visitors from all the states will come largely to see the fabulous Louisiana iris in all its glory.

The very names of some of the finer new hybrids are delightful to read: Bayou Sunset, Linda Leach, Gay Deceiver, Pale Hands, Early Morn, Edith Dupre, Cherry Bounce, Barbara Nelson, Royal Gem, Sunny, Angel Fare, June Clouds, The Khan, Ruth Dormon, Southern Moon . . . Now Geddes Douglas of Nashville, and Frank Chowning of Little Rock, are edging in on our Louisianas, hybridizing, and giving us such beauties as Spring Sorcery, Dixie Deb, Big Dove, etc. For years Dr. Reed, of Brooklyn Botanical Garden, has crossed these irises, with some amazing results. And some of the Washington hybrids have long been known to iris growers. Our native irises succed wonderfully in California and Texas, and many growers are enthusiastically acclaiming them.

In spite of the aristocratic newcomers, many of the old collected forms will always be grown, for their rich colors and grace of form. Bayou Vermilion, Haile Selassie, Jeune Fille, Wild Swan, Cajan, Mary Debaillon, Reflected Light, Peggy Mac, Royal Highness, and Kraemer Yellow will find a place in gardens for years to come. The last named is just one of the many lovely iris which have come from the bog owned by Mrs. Rene Kraemer, of Thibodaux. Two recently collected varieties, Delta Treasure and Lockett's Luck, are as lovely as any of the new hybrids.

It is a long story, and others whose names cannot all be listed here, have contributed. Many of those who took a leading part have passed on, but each left his or her contribution to a rich heritage. These would be happy to know that our wonderful native irises are now grown around the world. They thrive in Australia. And I am just in receipt of a letter from a famous iris breeder of France, inquiring about the Louisiana iris. An so they go on and on - destination unknown.

(Reprinted by permission from the October, 1950 issue of Home Gardening for the South, New Orleans, Louisiana)

